## Between ambition and approach: Towards sustainable knowledge management in development organizations

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# BETWEEN AMBITION AND APPROACH: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

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## Abstract

Over the past forty years, worldwide efforts have been mobilized to address the inequalities that have led to the marginalization and deprivation of billions of people. These efforts have been broached by the sector of development cooperation, which is increasingly recognized as a knowledge-intensive sector. In this article, we critically analyze how knowledge management is perceived and approached within development organizations. We identify a contradiction in terms of the *ambition* of knowledge management to foster an open networking perspective, versus the *approach* by which knowledge management is implemented. This approach is characterized by four biases: a management, technology, objectivist, and transfer bias. We argue that as a result of these biases, knowledge management risks becoming counter effective to development purposes, strengthening rather than mitigating power inequalities. We present the concept of situated mutual learning as a promising avenue to overcoming the prevailing contradictions, contributing to more sustainable and effective development interventions. The study is based on seven case studies of development organizations and comprises fifty interviews of practitioners and policy makers actively involved in knowledge management.

**Key words:** development cooperation; knowledge management; transfer bias; situated mutual learning.

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past forty years, worldwide efforts have been mobilized to address the inequalities that have led to the marginalization and deprivation of billions of people. These efforts have been broached by what has become a vast sector of development cooperation. The sector has seen a shift in focus since its introduction, reflecting a transition from foreign aid as predominantly a macro-economic impetus, to a humanist perspective that perceives development as a process involving a repertoire of knowledge, skills, competencies and personal connections (human and social capital) which determines people's capacity to respond to the challenges in their environment (Powell 2006; Thorbecke 2000).

Organizations that differentiate themselves primarily through their ability to access, generate and leverage specialized knowledge have been described in the field of organization studies as knowledge intensive organizations (KIO's) (Alvesson 2001; Starbuck 1992). Correspondingly, development can be characterized as a knowledge-intensive sector, and development agencies as knowledge intensive organizations.

It is striking to note that many development organizations have adapted to this relatively new image of organizations as collectives of knowledge users and producers. In fact, the knowledge management hype that has been introduced more than two decades ago in business organizations is enthusiastically embraced by the development sector (Quaggiotto 2005).

This interest in knowledge management within the development sector is also gaining ground in academia, reflected by the growing number of publications reporting on the role of knowledge management for development (KMD) (see for instance Haas 2006; Hardy, Philips and Lawrence 2003; King 2000; McGrath and King 2004; McFarlane 2006a,b; Spencer 2008). Specific to these academic studies is that they recognize the complexities related to knowledge in terms of overcoming inequalities and effectuating change, towards which development is geared. Compared however to the widespread attention for and implementation of knowledge and learning approaches in business firms, this research is still in its infancy. Moreover, literature on KMD is often focused on the *potential* advantages which knowledge management can bring, rather than providing evidence of its impact (Ramalingam 2005).

In this article we understand knowledge management as those processes aimed at supporting knowledge sharing, in order to strengthen organizational learning. This paper comprises a critical analysis of how knowledge management is perceived and approached within the development sector. We identify a contradiction in terms of the *ambition* versus the *approach* by which knowledge management is implemented. On the one hand, many organizations have the ambition to improve their organizational learning capabilities in order to become more effective in terms of overcoming inequalities. They recognize that this calls for an open perspective, integrating the knowledge and expertise of a wide variety of development stakeholders. On the other hand, KMD is often approached from a top down 'engineering' perspective, implementing tools and technologies, based on the assumption that this will stimulate people to share knowledge (Cummings 2008; McFarlane 2006a; Van der Velden 2002). The underlying theory of knowledge to such an instrumentalist approach is an *objectivist* epistemology, whereby knowledge is viewed as a commodity or entity (Glazer 1998; Szulanski 1996) that can be transferred between a sender and a receiver. Moreover, the content of knowledge is not problematized, but taken at face value as if containing 'universal truth'. This instrumental approach is problematic for various reasons, as has been argued by many authors (for instance Brown and Duguid 2001; Cook and Brown 1999; Hendriks 2001; Hislop 2005; McDermott 2003; Wilson 2002), contributing to the failure of many knowledge management projects. In light of the particularities of the development sector, where contextual differences are so pertinent to the success of an approach, and power inequalities the essence of what development is aimed at overcoming however, such an instrumental approach to knowledge management has more serious consequences than adding yet another project on the list of failed initiatives.

We will argue in this paper that an instrumental approach to KMD might be counterproductive, contributing to unequal power relations by reinforcing Western hegemony. In fact, knowledge management approached from an instrumental perspective will support the tendency of donor organizations to focus on the 'transfer' of dominant knowledge. With such a focus on teaching instead of mutual learning, in the end, knowledge management could even contribute to further marginalization of stakeholders. Clearly, this doom scenario needs to be avoided at any cost. In order to strive for a more sustainable KMD a radically different approach to knowledge management, corresponding to the espoused ambitions of the development sector, should be strived for.

In this paper, we first discuss the role of knowledge in development organizations and the overall ambitions that yielded to the adoption of KMD. Next, we discuss the theories in use by analyzing the ruling approaches towards KMD. We identify the complexities and their adverse effects and illustrate them with examples taken from 50 interviews with various development organizations actively involved in knowledge management. This will be followed with a discussion of a possible solution to a more sustainable knowledge management by overcoming the prevailing contradictions in terms of ambitions and approaches. We will introduce the concept of 'situated mutual learning' as a promising avenue to overcome these adversities and to contribute to more long lasting and effective development interventions. In an attempt to present KMD as an important field for further research, we conclude this paper with a critical research agenda.

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS AND THE AMBITION TO LEARN THROUGH KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING

Traditionally, development is often related to concepts of welfare and economic dynamics. Although these are without doubt important enablers, human wellbeing cannot be measured solely through quantifiable indicators; rather, the combined repertoire of knowledge, skills, competencies and personal connections (human and social capital) determine to a large extent people's capacity to respond to the challenges in their environment (Laszlo and Laszlo 2002; OECD 2001; Sen 1999).

From a humanitarian perspective, development involves human factors, aimed at strengthening people's ability to respond to the challenges they encounter in their environments (Britton 2005; Ocampo 2002; Unwin 2007). Development is geared towards a change for the better, through people doing things differently and participating more actively in decision-making processes which affect them. Change is ultimately reflected in policy reform (Collier and Dollar 2001) and the implementation of these policies. However, whether policy is able to successfully capture the needs of development constituents and formulate relevant responses, depends on a thorough understanding of the cultural and socio-economic environment of the intended beneficiaries. In other words, effectiveness of development policies depends to a large extent on how well in-depth understanding of local situations is reflected and applied in decision-making processes.

In view of the changing perspective on development from a primarily economic to a socio-political orientation (Ocampo 2003; Thorbecke 2000), organizations working in this field increasingly have to maneuver political interests at international, national and even local levels (think for instance of an organization working on reproductive health in settings with strong prevailing religious beliefs on contraception). This context, combined with the varied services comprised in the development sector (from HIV/AIDS awareness, to providing micro credits, to emergency relief – and everything in between), development organizations increasingly seek to bring together expertise pertaining to their specific field of work, from both within and outside of the organization.

The global nature of many development challenges, such as HIV/Aids, humanitarian relief, et cetera (Quaggiotto 2005), as well as issues of 'globalization' (Anderson 2005; Collier and Dollar 2002; Doh and Teegen 2003; Lindenberg and Dobel 1999; Ocampo 2002; Ravallion 2001)[1], calls for joint forces and highly coordinated responses. Such responses should ideally be both globally informed and locally tailored. The distributed and complex nature of the field, together with the focus on connecting various fields of expertise and skills, induced many development organizations to search for ways to strengthen their access to knowledge.

The need to maneuver political arenas within a global setting explains why even the smallest NGOs have the ambition to create linkages and networks. Organizations are forging new connections and webs of relations to access expertise and relevant sources of knowledge, and to amplify their impact on a global stage (Lindenberg and Dobel 1999; Roberts, Jones and Fröhling 2005). On a broader scale, the trend towards a networking approach is in line with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which comprise eight priorities to be achieved by 2015. The MDGs were identified by UN member states and international

[1] Globalization is a broad and fairly ill-defined concept but can generally be understood as a complex and multifaceted process leading to greater interdependence among countries and their citizens. The discourse is often placed in an economic setting, but also relates to other equally important factors such as political, technological and cultural aspects of life (Fischer 2003). Critical debate pertaining to globalization often focuses on the processes of global integration, exploring its effects on trade, cultural diversity, migration and labor flows, and so forth. The overall effect of globalization is that people across the world are affected to a large extent by developments in other countries.

organizations in an effort to combat poverty and inequality in a coordinated manner. All development organizations receiving funding from public donor organizations are committed to contributing to the achievement of the MDGs. In specific, MDG 8 targets the development of a 'global partnership for development'. This is often interpreted as a motivation to adopt a networking approach to development.

In sum, the interest in knowledge management within the development sector was borne from the recognition that sustainable development involves interaction with stakeholders on local, national and international arenas – a scope so vast that the only way to do this is by forging networks. The rising importance of networking was given a further impetus by MDG8, as well as the growing popularity of the concepts of learning, knowledge and networking.

In order to critically assess the relatively new organizational perspective on networking in the field of development, it is important to analyze whether knowledge management does indeed contribute to development interventions that are more responsive to the challenges encountered by the intended beneficiaries. In order to address this broad research issue in more detail, we will analyze the basic beliefs behind the concept of knowledge management and explore what makes this concept so popular in the development sector. We will further analyze the overall approach to knowledge management and compare this with the ambition to adopt a more humanitarian and open approach to development, focused on developing a global partnership through networking, as mentioned above. We use a total of 50 semi-structured interviews with various actors within the development sector involved in KMD, in order to derive a better understanding of the complexities and potential pitfalls of embracing knowledge management within the development sector.

## METHOD AND RESEARCH SETTINGS

### Method

The study which we report on in this paper comprised case studies of seven development organizations. Different types of organizations in different geographical settings were selected to gather varied empirical evidence. The overall question that guided the research, is: "How does

knowledge management contribute to more responsive development interventions?". Development comprises enhanced participation of Southern development constituents in agenda setting processes. Constituents comprise (representatives of) the intended beneficiaries whose circumstances the interventions are aimed at improving. The unit of analysis are networks of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain. These professionals contribute to the development of policy-relevant knowledge within the domain or issue-area[2] (Haas 1992; Knorr-Cetina 1999).

Our selection of potential organizations was based on the assumption that at least two conditions might influence better participation in decision making. First is the introduction of knowledge management strategies. More and more development organizations turn explicitly to knowledge management as an attempt to improve their access to relevant sources of knowledge, particularly among their Southern stakeholders. The purpose of such approaches is to make their interventions more relevant to those they are trying to reach. It should be noted however that an explicit knowledge management implementation is by no means a necessary condition for improving learning processes and improved decision making. We therefore included organizations that had introduced formal knowledge management strategies as well as organizations that had not. Second, it can be assumed that participation in decision making is enhanced when contextually embedded knowledge is included, gained through local involvement of Southern stakeholders. We tried to include organizations within the development sector that provided a weighted distribution over these four conditions (presence and absence of explicit knowledge management; strong and weak Southern participation). We identified relevant organizations by means of a short unsolicited online inquiry, sent to members of an international KMD network[3]. 246 organizations responded. The network is an active community of mostly development practitioners, plus researchers, policy makers and private sector representatives, who are interested in knowledge management and knowledge sharing issues and approaches (for

[2] As such, the networks can be referred to as epistemic communities. The concept of epistemic communities has been introduced as a means to understand the mechanics of international policy coordination and influencing decision makers (Haas 1992).

[3] The survey questions can be provided upon request.

a case study of this network, see Ferguson and Cummings 2008). We asked these organizations if they were willing to contribute to our research, whether they had introduced a formal knowledge management strategy and whether or not they worked with Southern stakeholders. This resulted in a selection of seven organizations (see table 1). Figure 1 provides an overview of our case identification:

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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We also asked each organization to identify key people responsible for knowledge management or knowledge sharing programs in order to conduct a follow up interview (Appendix A: table 2). This resulted in 50 semi-structured interviews[4]. The interviews were fully transcribed. The interviews were further supplemented through archival data of each organization (policy documents, websites, evaluations, internal surveys, reports, et cetera).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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The data serves to illustrate the approaches and prevailing sentiments within the organizations in relation to knowledge management. The results provide a stepping stone for further, more in-depth research and theory development. Below, we briefly introduce the seven organizations.

**Organizational settings**

The bilateral organization focuses among others on themes such as poverty reduction, education, health care and the environment. The organization can be classified as a distributed organization, with a head office in the home country and 150 posts around the world, although the data collected here comprise only a representation of the former. A ministerial policy was approved in 2005, aimed at developing and implementing knowledge and research strategies for each of the

[4] The interview protocol can be provided upon request.

ministry's divisions, coordinated by the research and communications division. Four such strategies have been developed so far but further development seems to have stagnated at the time of our research. Furthermore, an initiative has been launched to develop thematic policy-research partnerships with leading research universities, aimed at fostering knowledge development and in-depth learning. So far, nine such partnerships are under way, in varying stages of development. Despite its Southern orientation, the organization is characterized by Northern participation.

The Dutch NGO ('Civil Society NGO') contributes to programmes on basic social services, sustainable economic development, democratisation and peace building, through donor support to partner organizations in 50 countries, and through various lobby activities on a national and international level. The organization adopted an institution-wide knowledge and learning strategy and is currently orienting itself toward reorganization as a 'network organization', which means that it aims to decentralize and conduct its work through various Southern partner organizations. Currently however the main decision making structures are exclusively Northern (Dutch).

The multilateral organization ('UN organization') is part of the 'UN-family' and is specifically focused on promoting social justice and internationally recognized human rights. It has a large head office and 40 field offices. The organization's management recently approved a knowledge management policy, but this is neither widely known, nor implemented across the organization's head office, let alone the field offices. The organization's structure involves representatives of the main stakeholder groups it aims to serve and therefore can be considered a 'hybrid' organization in terms of Northern and Southern participation.

A second multilateral donor organization in our study ('Donor KM Organization') represents donor agencies from across Europe, the US, Australia, New Zealand and various multilateral agencies. It is specifically focused on capacity development on a wide range of development topics, directed towards policy makers of its member organizations, as well as high level policy makers in developing countries. We contacted the knowledge management division of this organization, which provides predominantly information management and ICT advisory support to the rest of the organization. This organization has no Southern representation in its decision-making or consultative structures.

The Northern practitioner network organization ('Practitioner Network (North)') includes organizations clustered in and around the Washington DC region, providing information services to predominantly US development workers across the globe, but also to various development counterparts directly. It focuses on health-related topics and does not have a formal knowledge management policy or strategy, although knowledge sharing is its main *raison d'être*. This organization has no Southern representation in its decision-making or consultative structures.

The Uganda-based NGO ('NGO Uganda') is a network organization focusing on the use of technology towards sustainable development. It is geared towards the implementation of projects across the country, as well as policy influencing at a national level. It is locally managed but receives core funding from a European donor agency, supplemented at times by financial or in-kind support from local businesses. Similarly to Practitioner Network (North), the organization's main purpose is to generate knowledge and foster knowledge sharing, but no formal knowledge management policy is in place. Although the network includes some representatives of Northern organizations, the decision-making structures comprise only Southern representatives.

Finally, the Southern practitioner network organization ('Practitioner Network (South)') is a Southern-driven organization, representing Southern practitioners working on infrastructural issues in a development setting, with gender issues as a crosscutting theme. Its main activities are advocacy and research. The organization is guided by an explicit knowledge management policy, geared towards fostering networking, information sharing and mutual knowledge generation. A small secretariat is based in the UK, with three further hubs in Southern locations.

## FINDINGS

Our findings indicate that ambitions and approach in terms of knowledge management are often contradictory. As addressed above, the tendency to incorporate concepts as knowledge, learning and networking in development strategies is triggered by the growing awareness to adopt a more open and inclusive approach to development in order to improve learning with and from development constituents, ultimately seeking to improve aid effectiveness. Consequently, development organizations turn to knowledge management as a way to support this collective ambition. In order to understand better whether indeed knowledge management is the right means

to fulfill this ambition, we analyzed how knowledge management is presently being approached. In general, it can be said that development organization are inclined to adopt a rather instrumental, technocratic approach that is focused more on teaching than on mutual learning.

This contradiction is most evident in the Civil Society NGO, which is currently undergoing a major reorganization towards a network organization, while approaching this through an emphasis on technology implementation. A similar tendency is encountered within the UN Organization. This is reflected in the organization's 2007 knowledge management strategy, which is geared towards improving the organization's quality of work by fostering a knowledge sharing culture, directed both internally and externally. The organization also explicitly recognizes their constituents as key participants in the implementation of its strategy. The major vehicle by which the organization aims to realize its ambitions is through a modular digital 'toolkit' aimed at skill-building, accessing knowledge and building networks.

In its 2005 research policy briefing, the Bilateral Organization articulates the desire to develop interactive knowledge networks aimed at fostering change and development, but a major component of its knowledge management approach is individual training programs. While individual learning can be beneficial to the policymaker undertaking such trainings, their contribution to organizational learning is weak, and minimal in terms of the development of interactive networks.

The Donor KM Organization aims to foster joint learning, but focuses almost exclusively on the web platform for resource sharing. Within the other three organizations, the tendency towards technocratic, instrumental approaches is less obvious, but is increasing as staff becomes more familiar with the use of technology.

**Management bias**

It is striking to notice that almost all organizations recognized the importance of knowledge management because of a managerial need to 'control' knowledge. For instance, the Bilateral Organization works with a staff rotation system, meaning that there is a strong perceived loss of knowledge when staff changes posts. The organization's knowledge management approach is aimed at 'capturing' this knowledge in order to make it available to successors. In another example, the Civil Society NGO is about to embark on a reorganization towards a networking

organization, decentralizing decision making and management to Southern hubs. Therefore, efforts are underway to 'capture' organizational knowledge so that knowledge is made more transparent and the 'reinvention of wheels' is minimized. The Practitioner Network (North) works primarily through face-to-face knowledge sharing, aimed at improving health information services to Southern constituents, and does this by developing information repositories such as shared databases, spreadsheets, and so forth. Such efforts are introduced to foster more efficiency within the organization.

The common denominator among the organizations is their recognition that the key to their success as development organizations lies in their ability to leverage expertise, and they therefore feel the need to manage their knowledge resources. This approach reveals a *management bias*: knowledge management is approached from a managerial perspective, rather than as something that emerges 'naturally' from within the organization in support of workers' responsibilities (Huysman and De Wit 2002). To use the concepts of Argyris and Schon (1991), this is not always the *espoused theory*, but in all organizations studied it reflects their *theories in use*. For instance, in the Bilateral Organization there is a general recognition that knowledge sharing cannot be enforced, and depends on the willingness of staff and relevance to work, but at the same time, the success of knowledge management is perceived to depend on specific 'knowledge managers' and (a lack of) incentives from top management. Similar tendencies were observed within the Civil Society NGO and UN Organization where specific staff was appointed for knowledge management purposes, devolving responsibility to a handful of people rather than dispersing it throughout the organization. In all these organizations, staff feels a need to gain incentives for participation in knowledge sharing; the risk in this however is a crowding out effect: when the incentive is removed, so too does staff's willingness to continue knowledge sharing (Osterloh and Frey 2000).

Overall, the management bias leads to an over-emphasis on management involvement in stimulating knowledge sharing, yielding resistance and rejection among staff (Bilateral Organization), knowledge sharing fatigue (UN Organization), or a tendency to placate management by "*talking the talk but not walking the walk*" (Bilateral and UN Organizations).

As has been mentioned in previous studies, successful knowledge management depends on the *willingness* of knowledge workers to share knowledge, which in turn depends for a great deal on

the *relevance* of the knowledge being shared to workers' context and activities (for instance Alvesson 2001; Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001; Roberts 2006). This is reflected especially in the NGO Uganda, the Practitioner Network (North) and the Practitioner Network (South). These organizations emerged in response to concrete, on the ground needs (respectively, poor and unreliable infrastructure and dispersed lack of knowledge on how to address this problem; a cluster of geographically collocated organizations working on a common theme and having to address common challenges; and the recognition of a hiatus in terms of available infrastructure by development practitioners). While participation in these organizations' knowledge sharing and networking activities is entirely voluntary, participation has grown incrementally and activities are flourishing.

**Technology bias**

Next, and in line with the management focus, is the technocratic orientation that is reflected in all seven cases. Knowledge management as seen from this *technology bias* assumes that the most obvious way to share knowledge is through usage of ICT: as long as the appropriate tools and means are provided, people can and will share knowledge. This tendency has been described as the 'ICT trap' (Huysman and De Wit 2004), and suits to describe the – enduring – preference among the organizations studied to focus on tools and methods for sharing knowledge, irrespective of whether they are in fact appropriate to match the objectives of the organization, or match its culture. Technology is perceived as key to improving knowledge sharing, and knowledge management efforts are largely related to implementing technologies, and training and encouraging staff to use them.

The most obvious examples of the technology bias can be found within the Civil Society NGO. The organization introduced 'facilitators of learning', whose primary responsibilities involve 'developing an institutional memory', by way of storing information, making it available to others through digital means (information databases, wikis, et cetera), and supporting staff in their usage of those technologies. Facilitators are aimed at relationship building with external 'centers of expertise' and Southern partners, whereby wikis and listservs play a critical role. Another example of the technology bias is given by the Donor KM Organization who introduced knowledge management as a way to promote e-learning and improve communications, and chose to implement this through a focus on a website: "*we are trying to pick up knowledge management*

*… So if you talk about exchanging experiences, you need a central tool to enable that, which is why we invested a lot in the development of a good website, and especially maintain it. We also have an electronic bulletin. … Those are the first steps. But if there are also other tools we can use, then gladly"* (MLO-KM1). The person in charge of this project (a senior official with a background in engineering) expresses that *"people like to participate in meetings far from the office, it's a good opportunity for walking around. But technologies are capable to fulfill all that instead"* (MLO-KM3). The knowledge management discussion paper guiding the project exclusively presents and discusses technologies for knowledge management and capacity building purposes. What the organization experienced once the website was completed, was first, minimal active usage of the website; second, a call for the development of a new website with more/other functionality, because the initial website has not improved communications; and third, an overall lack of interest to continue with what was being pitched as knowledge management, as reflected in a 2008 survey report. These are typical symptoms of the ICT trap: organizations believe that earlier barriers can be overcome simply by improving the technology (Huysman and De Wit 2004).

In combination, the technology and management bias reflect the engineering approach to knowledge management that is quite pervasive in organizations (see Van den Hooff and Huysman, in press). Typical to this engineering approach is the that knowledge management strategies are introduced as 'additional' to core business processes and as extra tasks in often already burdened workloads. This is confirmed in almost each of the interviews across the organizations studied. For instance, "*sometimes you just are so caught up in urgent issues, that you just don't have time to learn"* (NNGO11)*;* "*there is one thing about knowledge sharing, it is quite time consuming*" (MLO11); "*space has to be created for knowledge management. Everybody is already overburdened, so there is resistance because they think that knowledge management and time for knowledge is an extra burden which costs time that they don't have*" (BLO5). When management develops different priorities, or when a knowledge management tool doesn't 'work', or its novelty has worn out, staff proceeds back to the order of the day, and knowledge management is dismissed as ineffective.

The Practitioner Network (South) has adopted a different approach, first facilitating the development of a network through face to face encounters, and then introducing ICT after the

network has become more established. This improves the likelihood of technologies responding to users' needs, and thus the chance for knowledge management approaches to succeed (Alavi and Leidner 2001). It is striking that now that a digitization trajectory has been initiated in this organization, the key to successful networking is said to be *technology* skills, and "*not being afraid of technology*" (SNO2).

Clearly, the engineering approach to knowledge management is not helpful in fulfilling the ambitions to fostering a more inclusive development paradigm. Next to this engineering approach, we found that most initiatives are focused on connecting the knowledge of the employees working for development organizations without explicitly taking into account the locally embedded knowledge that is developed within the developing regions and countries itself. This was revealed when we focused more on the actual content of the knowledge.

**Objectivist bias**

Underlying the management and technology bias is a so-called objectivist perspective on knowledge. Objectivist epistemology views knowledge as a commodity or entity (Cook and Brown 1999) that can be transferred between a sender and a receiver. The content of knowledge in itself is not problematized but taken at face value, as if containing 'universal truth'.

From this perspective, all knowledge – including personal, tacit knowledge – can be externalized (Nonaka 1994). Our data reflects that in five of the seven organizations studied, an attitude prevails that knowledge is not 'real' knowledge or useful, unless it is made explicit. Knowledge management is primarily aimed at making organizational knowledge explicit, and capturing it in documents and databases (Bilateral Organization; UN Organization; Civil Society Organization; Donor KM Organization; Practitioner Network (North)). For instance, *"there is a lot of informal exchange and learning, but not much of that is captured. We are looking at how we can agendize this, to stimulate awareness that you can only have a successful consultation if the results can be made explicit"* (NNGO1). This externalization approach to knowledge can be said to be driven by an *objectivist bias*, a perspective on knowledge as a storable and transferable resource. Interestingly, we found that the two Southern oriented networks have a less explicit externalization approach to knowledge management, predominantly emphasizing face to face knowledge sharing as the most effective knowledge management approaches. This might be

attributable to a stronger oral tradition to transfer indigenous knowledge in many developing countries , versus the Western preference for written accounts and scientific knowledge to underscore the pretence of universal validity (Briggs and Sharp 2004; Finlay 2008; Jaya 2001). Less reliable technology infrastructure could also play a role.

**Transfer bias**

Knowledge management as seen through an epistemology of possession as described above, is largely oriented around the *transfer* of knowledge such as training, and around gathering, storing and manipulating 'stocks' of knowledge (Alavi and Leidner 2001) through tools and technologies. This implies that knowledge is considered a one-dimensional entity 'that can be delivered unchanged as a development 'solution'' (McFarlane 2006a), and whereby there is no apparent need to include the perspectives of those stakeholders beyond the boundaries of the organization. As a result, the primary focus of KMD is often the Northern development agencies themselves (King 2000) and the internal knowledge possessed by team members, as opposed to external knowledge, possessed with and by outside sources (Haas 2006). Despite this internal orientation, the ultimate beneficiaries are claimed to be the Southern stakeholders in the developing world, although these are often not reached nor even involved. This is particularly evident in the Bilateral Organization: "*The target group is in the first instance the colleagues in the field offices"* (BLO2), and "*the higher management layers, not the poor person in a shantytown. We simply do not work at that local level"* (BLO2).

The focus on knowledge transfer has two consequences in terms of knowledge management. The first involves a distinct disconnect between Northern and Southern development stakeholders. "*Everyone who says that we don't understand much about Africa is right. You can suggest activities to get local knowledge from villages into our organization, but that leads to nowhere as we can't do anything with that knowledge, we are not working on that level"* (BLO 10). Besides the recognized difficulty of reaching and including 'local knowledge' or the knowledge of stakeholders outside the agency itself, it appears that much of this knowledge is not deemed relevant.

The second consequence is a preference within development organizations, encountered particularly at the beginning of this decade, for knowledge management approaches focusing on

the collection and sharing of best practices, case stories, 'lessons learned', the development of 'knowledge clearing houses', and so forth (for instance, the Bridges.org Case Studies series[5]; the ICT Stories[6] competition; the Development Gateway[7]). Although the cases and stories shared were often interesting windows into the challenges and approaches which specific development actors encountered, they said little if nothing about how such efforts could be duplicated in different contexts, or what it was that made them succeed or fail[8]. Especially in the specific context of development organizations, the replicability of lessons learned is limited from one context to another, due to language barriers, differences in geographical and political circumstances, perceptions towards the cause of inequalities, and so forth. For instance, development practitioners in Latin America are often characterized as having a stronger 'activist' mentality, perceiving themselves to be victims of suppression, and taking a political approach to development, as opposed to their peers in Africa who often attribute their inequalities a result of unfortunate circumstances and take a more economic approach to development (SNO2)). In other words, best practices have mediocre effect in fostering learning about more effective development. Indeed, after the initial hype, such approaches fizzled out.

The overall knowledge management approach encountered reinforces a knowledge transfer scenario –which is most often from North to South - whereby Western development solutions are imposed upon the realities of development constituents (Escobar 1995). Our cases reflected awareness of this problem, and most indicated that this was particularly a problem in the past: "*For a long time there was a strong top-down approach, whereby we came up with solutions that we think are appropriate for the South"* (NNGO2); in an effort to overcome this top-down

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[5] Bridges.org ICT-enabled Development Case Study series: http://www.bridges.org/case_studies Accessed on September 4 2008.

[6] IICD, GKP and infoDev: http://www.iconnect-online.org/stories/ Accessed on September 4 2008.

[7] Development Gateway (World Bank): http://www.developmentgateway.org/ Accessed on September 19 2008. For a critical review of the Development Gateway, see for instance Bebbington, Guggenheim, Olsen and Woolcock (2004); Fidler (2001); King (2002); Mehta (2001); Thompson (2004).

[8] See also Orlikowski (2002) and Szulanski (1996) for analyses of the limited effect of knowledge sharing via best practices.

approach, the Civil Society NGO was undergoing a decentralization to Southern hubs. However, all of the Northern organizations reflected very little active involvement of Southern constituents in their knowledge management activities. In the Practitioner Network (North) programs inviting active participation of Southern constituents in decision-making processes existed previously, and were deemed successful by all participants. Nonetheless, funding cuts forced such programs to be cancelled. This problem similarly affected Southern involvement in the Donor KM Organization. In the Bilateral Organization, the policy-research partnerships primarily involve Northern research institutes, with Southern development constituents participating passively as the research subjects. These three examples illustrate how Northern development policymakers' and practitioners' perceptions continue to shape development agendas, rather than the underlying situation articulated by the people directly facing development challenges. Even where Southern stakeholders are involved, a similar problem can be encountered. For instance, Practitioner Network (South) mentioned a case in which Northern development practitioners are aware of a problem on the ground, yet favor geo-political interests over evidence from the field that alternative priorities should be tended to (for instance World Bank agendas prioritizing high visibility infrastructure projects rather than much-needed maintenance projects; SNO1).

When knowledge is envisaged as a 'packageable solution' to development challenges (McFarlane 2006b), the possibility of different ways of knowing is excluded (Briggs and Sharp 2004). The ensuing risk is that the voices of development constituents are overlooked and opportunities to identify alternative perspectives on development are missed. "*The local staff knows much more about their local context than we do. And yet we barely take advantage of their knowledge. ... This is in part because they are lower in rank and are deemed second rate. (Agency) staff always takes the lead, so you see that when they speak, the local staff keeps their mouth shut*" (BLO4). In other words, the strength of a contribution is determined by rank, not by knowledgeability of a situation. The development agenda fails to connect to the realities of constituents and lacks relevance to local situations, ultimately overshooting its target. Indeed, Mudimbe (1988) identifies that the prioritization of development challenges derive less from the challenges, opportunities and solutions as encountered by the people in the South as from a view on reality imposed by 'experts'' perceptions of the supposed beneficiaries.

Prior empirical research by Sole and Edmondson (2002) demonstrates that in contexts of distributed knowledge, knowledge transfer cannot take place without recognizing and adjusting for local practices. Development organizations often overlook the situated character of knowledge, which recognizes that knowledge is embedded in locale specific practices (Sole and Edmondson 2002). In this view, approaches to knowledge sharing are ineffective, indeed irrelevant, unless they are embedded in the social environment of which they are a part.

The context of international development presents a poignant case in this context. It is a sector comprising a broad array of intrinsically unequal stakeholders (donors, decision-makers, beneficiaries, practitioners) who need to work together, often geographically dispersed and culturally diverse. Each of these stakeholders has their own 'situated knowledge', which comprises contextually-embedded, site-specific work practices (Sole and Edmondson 2002; see also Lave and Wenger 1991). "*You try and develop a type of relationship which is more mutual than saying 'I am from the donor organization, so I determine how things go, because I have the funding. We try and break through this dynamic, so you try not to address weaknesses in knowledge too harshly. But well, it is a balancing act between what you impose, and accepting people as they are*" (NNGO 1).

## DISCUSSION

In the previous section, we presented the results of our study. We found that development organizations harness knowledge management to facilitate stronger inclusion of their Southern constituents, with the ultimate aim to make development interventions more responsive to the challenges they encounter. However, the way by which this was implemented was an instrumental, engineering approach, with a focus on teaching rather than on learning with and from stakeholders of the developing countries.

The incompatibility between ambition on the one hand and approach on the other has serious consequences. To put it bluntly, without bringing the approach in line with the ambitions, in the long run knowledge management will be self-destructive of the sector's mission and purpose. The managerial bias within the KMD approaches, together with the bias of using technology, a biased focus on knowledge as an objective entity, and a tendency to focus on teaching instead of

learning with and from developing countries, is counterproductive to a sustainable and open relation with the South. In the light of the specific sector as highly sensitive to political and power struggles, the bias towards knowledge transfer might be seen as the most serious condition detracting from the general ambition. Transfer approaches might even strengthen the domination of Northern agencies in terms of defining the policy agenda, further marginalizing Southern participation in agenda setting. Not only does such marginalization foreclose the opportunity to identify innovative development approaches, but it contributes to the perpetuation of power inequalities between donors and recipients. It is precisely these inequalities which the development sector is aimed at overcoming. In other words, development efforts risk becoming self-defeating.

In the next section, we unpack the concept of power and knowledge and explore what this implies for a development context.

**Power/knowledge and development discourse**

Power and its relation to knowledge is widely acknowledged as a central challenge in knowledge management, yet is seldom explored thoroughly (Alvesson and Kärreman 2001; Contu and Willmott 2003; Fox 2000; Hardy 1996; Hislop 2005; Roberts 2006). All uses of knowledge and consequently, attempts to direct or manage knowledge, involve the use of power. Conversely, knowledge determines who has access to power and profit (Unesco 2005: 159). Indeed, knowledge management is ‘not only about remembering and managing knowledge, but actively marginalizing, discarding and forgetting knowledge not deemed as legitimate’ (Hislop 2005: 98). In this view, the dissemination of knowledge is perceived as a highly political process involving negotiations to establish the legitimacy of competing knowledge claims (Hislop 2005; Rossi 2004).

Fundamentally, development organizations are pursuing ways by which to overcome the inequalities inherent in the donor-recipient relationship, and therefore seek ways by which to establish a common discourse for effective dialogue and collaboration. A discourse legislates what kinds of knowledge and information are valuable to a particular domain, and whose knowledge is recognized and deemed relevant (McFarlane 2006a; Rossi 2004). It comprises the

vocabulary, instruments and theories informing a group's perspective and imposes a particular view on a reality (Rossi 2004).

Authors such as Mudimbe (1988), Ferguson (1994) and Escobar (1995) have argued that development practice itself is a discourse invented and perpetuated by expert networks in order to protect Western interests, while excluding the supposed beneficiaries of development interventions, the marginalized people in developing countries themselves. The discourse itself, from the perspective of the 'experts', becomes the main focus of attention (Foucault 1980), rather than the underlying situation articulated by the people directly facing development challenges. As a result, their marginalization is enhanced and pressing problems are not resolved (see also Easterly 2006; Hickey 2004; Unwin 2007).

Networks of experts are also known as 'epistemic communities'. Epistemic communities contribute to the development of domain-specific knowledge in order to influence decision makers (Haas 1992; Knorr Cetina 1999). While the expert knowledge which epistemic communities contribute to policy processes is generally legitimate and often perceived as of value, the 'in-crowd' language and knowledge which such communities establish can lead to the exclusion of those who do not command the vocabulary and knowledge inherent to a dominant discourse within a domain.

The challenge which development faces as a knowledge-intensive sector, is establishing a common knowledge base, while overcoming the exclusivity of epistemic communities which perpetuate dominant discourse, in order to foster more inclusive development models. This balancing act has been addressed by several authors (Briggs and Sharp 2004; Finlay 2008; McFarlane 2006a; Rossi 2004), who propose that epistemic communities or exclusive discourses can be influenced from within to generate knowledge more advantageous to development purposes.

Overall, epistemic communities are often critical in terms of setting development agendas. This means that stakeholders need to find a delicate balance between co-optation into established discourse, and negotiating space for their own ends from within (see also Gough and Shackley 2001). Where such space is negotiated, mutual learning can be achieved, presenting a promising avenue towards more sustainable development.

**Towards situated mutual learning in development**

The literature on knowledge management generally refers to two streams: epistemologies of possession and epistemologies of practice (Cook and Brown 1999), which correspond to first and second generation knowledge management (Huysman and De Wit 2004). The organizations participating in our research reflected a tendency towards a knowledge transfer approach, relying heavily on technologies, and perceiving knowledge management as an additional act rather than integrated in core business practices. Such a first generation approach to knowledge management risks reinforcing dominant discourses, and is likely to be counterproductive to development purposes by maintaining pervasive power inequalities.

The practice-based view on knowledge comprises a perspective which at first seems more in line with development organizations' ambitions to foster stronger participation of Southern stakeholders. The practice-based view emphasizes that knowledge gains meaning in the context of interaction, and therefore comprises a component of collectiveness (Brown and Duguid 2001; Powell 2006). This means that knowledge management does not so much involve capturing and transferring explicit knowledge, but rather is aimed at fostering social relations, and creating pathways to gain knowledge while carrying out work-related tasks (Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001). A knowledge management perspective from a practice-based perspective is conducive to establishing a more inclusive development model. Namely, it takes into consideration the situated character of knowledge, recognizing that knowledge is embedded in locale specific practices (Sole and Edmondson 2002).

However, in case of the development sector, it is at least questionable whether indeed this practice-based perspective offers the best way to fulfill its ambitions. Most importantly, the concepts of situated knowledge still insufficiently provide a solution to the inward-looking view of development practitioners, restricting their ability to look beyond familiar practices and think beyond dominant discourses. A criticism on situated knowledge is that it can be invisible to those external to a practice, because knowledge is often taken for granted by a community and is therefore not shared (Sole and Edmondson 2002; see also Amin and Roberts 2008; Huysman 2003). As a result, the possibility of influencing the external environment is limited.

Therefore, we advocate for a *situated mutual learning* approach that goes one step further. Empirical research by Sole and Edmondson (2002) demonstrates that in contexts of distributed knowledge, knowledge transfer cannot take place without *recognizing and adjusting* for local practices. This means that 'knowledges', or multiple sources of situated knowledge, need to be integrated into a mutual frame of reference (see for instance Cramton 2001). Situated mutual learning presents a way to create space within dominant discourses, and thereby overcoming power/knowledge inequalities.

March (1991) has described how the interaction between individuals and their organizational environment contributes to mutual learning. This involves a focus on learning whereby individuals overcome their 'epistemic differences' (Brown and Duguid 2001), and whereby situated practices, context, and bargaining positions contribute to the generation of common knowledge. Situated mutual learning is an outcome of negotiation between parties and takes into account unequal positions and power relations. Learning is not a one-way process of knowledge transfer, but comprises multiple, mutually dependent parties. Indeed, it is not *despite* epistemic differences, but *through* them, that learning occurs and novel solutions can be developed to pervasive development challenges (Haas 1990; McFarlane 2006b).

## CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A CRITICAL RESEARCH AGENDA

In this paper we explored how the development sector has embraced knowledge management. Our research showed that knowledge management approaches in the development sector reflect a tendency towards first generation knowledge management, guided by an epistemology of possession. One of the most prevailing characteristics within the sector is a focus on knowledge transfer, and 'forced learning' processes. The risk is that knowledge management fails to contribute to the sector's ability to become more responsive to the needs of their intended beneficiaries in the South and develop innovative solutions to pervasive challenges. More fundamentally, power/knowledge inequalities are left unaddressed, or worse, strengthened. Overall, knowledge management might become counter-effective to development efforts.

As a recognized knowledge-intensive sector, development organizations have an intrinsic need for a management approach that puts knowledge processes at the centre of their operations. There

is a growing awareness of the necessity to draw on sources of knowledge among a wide variety of development constituents to ensure that what are presented as development solutions correspond to on the ground realities. To ensure that this ambition can be reached, we believe a more sustainable approach to knowledge management is in order.

Our research builds on prior work that identifies the inherent difficulties of knowledge sharing across multiple cultures and across unequal power relations (Bechky 2003; Holden and Von Kortzfleish 2004; Lam 1997; McFarlane 2006b; Sole and Edmondson 2002). Our research is not aimed at finding concrete solutions to these challenges[9]. Rather, it reflects on the particular consequences of these challenges in the development sector, signaling the potential counter-effectiveness of knowledge management to achieving sustainable development. We provide suggestions as to which approaches to knowledge management are likely to correspond with the sector's espoused ambitions, and argued for a focus on situated mutual learning as the core of KMD. Such a focus could contribute to creating space for multiple knowledges beyond dominant development discourses, and greater participation and empowerment in agenda setting.

We identify a number of implications for further research. Our research provides a description of organizational perceptions, ambitions and approaches to knowledge management. The next step is to test the implications that we have touched upon in the discussion of this paper. How does knowledge management contribute to strengthening participation of Southern constituents in agenda setting? How does knowledge management influence power dynamics, and how can it contribute to overcoming the inherent inequalities in dominant development paradigms (such as the donor-recipient relationship)? An important question is how people maneuver themselves into influential positions within epistemic communities to negotiate stronger positions for their voices. Longitudinal case studies could provide a response to such questions. Further, future research projects could for instance select cases based on their functioning, and explore which factors contribute to situated mutual learning in the development sector, by juxtaposing successful and less successful networks.

[9] Thompson and Walsham (2004) and Holden and Von Kortfleisch (2004) have developed conceptual frameworks which might be fitting for more concrete solution-oriented research in the development context.

Social network analysis, supplemented by further qualitative evidence can provide further insight into the spheres of influence and dynamics of mutual learning between donors and their Southern constituents. This could include, for instance, a verification of whether development interventions articulated by Northern organizations correspond to what Southern constituents perceive as priorities, or which other sources are leading. Further, a quantitative approach based on for instance semantic analysis of online discussions allows researchers to make inferences about message content (Krippendorf 2004; Van Atteveldt 2008) which can help visualize how development issues are agendized and how or even whether they affect policy processes.

This study sought to contribute to theory building related to knowledge management in a development context, positioning it within the fields of organization studies and development studies. A closer alignment of the two fields of has three mutual benefits. First, organization studies can provide in-depth insight into ways by which to enhance organizational effectiveness within development organizations. Although the non-profit objectives in development differ from the commercial purposes in most organization studies, the two sectors share a motive to perform better. Second, concepts of power/knowledge are relevant to any knowledge-intensive sector but are magnified in the development sector through the intrinsic inequality of the donor-recipient relationship. Power/knowledge concepts can deepen understanding of the effects of globalization and internationalization on organizational dynamics and ways by which to articulate a space 'for the local within the global' setting (Jaya 2001), and vice versa. Third, the development sector reveals insight into forms of organization, tensions and leadership examples beyond the predominant Western ones (Jaya 2001; Karsten and Illa 2005), and can thereby strengthen the creativity of strategic development.

Overall, as a nascent field, the realm of research in KMD is still wide open. Through our research we have touched upon a number of the preliminary questions, presenting some of the challenges which the development sector encounters in its core business in general and in knowledge management in particular. We hope to trigger interest in an important research field that can contribute to sustainable development, and the mitigation of pervasive development challenges.

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## APPENDIX A, TABLE 2: INTERVIEWEES

| Identifier | Function within organization |
|---|---|
| BLO1 | Director, Department of Documentation and Information |
| BLO2 | Policy Officer, Effectivity and Quality Division |
| BLO3 | Knowledge Officer, Environment & Water |
| BLO4 | Organization Advisor (HRM) |
| BLO5 | Policy Officer, Environment & Water |
| BLO6 | Country Officer, Africa |
| BLO7 | Head, Organizational Development |
| BLO8 | Policy Officer, Financial Economic Affairs |
| BLO9 | Senior Policy Advisor, Knowledge and Research |
| BLO10 | Policy Officer, Research and Communications |
| BLO11 | Policy Officer, Social and Institutional Development Civil Society |
| BLO12 | Head, Department of Social Policy |
| NNGO1 | Program Specialist, Democratization and Peacebuilding |
| NNGO2 | Human Resources Advisor |
| NNGO3 | Project Officer, Economic Development |
| NNGO4 | Facilitator of Learning |
| NNGO5 | Head of Knowledge Management |
| NNGO6 | Advisor, Learning and Development (HRM) |
| NNGO7 | Project Officer, Economic Development |
| NNGO8 | Facilitator of Learning, Economic Development |
| NNGO9 | Officer, Instrument Management |
| NNGO10 | Executive Advisor and Director, Organizational Change |
| NNGO11 | Program Specialist, Food Safety |
| MLO1 | Program Manager [theme 1] |
| MLO2 | Program Manager [theme 2] |
| MLO 3 | Chief Librarian |

| | |
|---|---|
| MLO 4 | Coordinator, Knowledge Management [theme 3] |
| MLO5 | Information Manager [theme 3] |
| MLO6 | Financial Manager [theme 1] |
| MLO7 | Head, Policy Integration and Statistics |
| MLO8 | Information Assistant, Technical Cooperation |
| MLO9 | Policy Officer, Donor Relations |
| MLO10 | Program Analyst, Programming and Management |
| MLO11 | Project Manager, Gender Equality |
| MLO12 | (Former) Project Manager, Knowledge Management [theme 2] |
| MLO13 | Head, Training and Staff Development |
| MLO14 | Project Manager, Knowledge Management [theme 1] |
| MKM1 | Chair, Head of Training Division |
| MKM2 | Training and Staff Development Officer |
| MKM3 | Senior Offical, Knowledge Management and Training |
| MKM4 | Webmaster |
| NN1 | (Former) Co-Chair, Head of Knowledge Management |
| NN2 | Co-Chair, Director of Communications [thematic health program] |
| NN3 | Co-Chair, Head of Research and Publications |
| SNGO1 | Network Coordinator |
| SNGO2 | Founder, Board Member, Network member |
| SNGO3 | Executive Manager |
| SNGO4 | Officer, Knowledge Sharing |
| SN1 | Executive Director |
| SN2 | Communications Coordinator |

**FIGURE 1: 4x4 MATRIX OF CASE SELECTION**

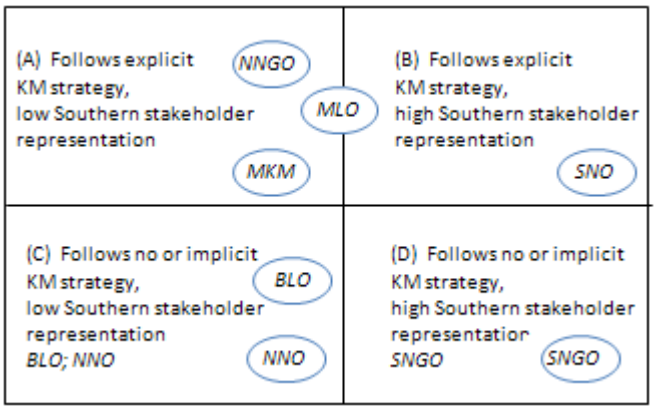


**TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF CASES**

| **Type of organization** | **Name & acronym** | **# interviewees** |
|---|---|---|
| Bilateral organization | 'Bilateral Organization' (BLO) | 12 |
| Non-government organization (the Netherlands) | 'Civil Society NGO' (NNGO) | 11 |
| Multilateral organization (UN) | 'UN organization' (MLO) | 14 |
| Multilateral donor organization, knowledge management division | 'Donor KM Organization' (MKM) | 4 |
| Practitioner network organization (USA) | 'Practitioner network (North)' (NNO) | 3 |
| Non-government organization (Uganda) | 'Uganda NGO' (SNGO) | 4 |
| Practitioner network organization (East and Southern Africa) | 'Practitioner network (South)' (SNO) | 2 |
| *Total* | | *50* |